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INFLUENTIAL FALLACIES ABOUT EDUCATION.¹

I REGRET any suggestion of discouragement or professional low spirits that there may be in the wording of my theme. Doubtful as I am of my power to treat it adequately, I can at least assure you that if I had been discouraged or low-spirited, I should never have undertaken it. Nor should this theme carry with it such suggestion. Fallacies in one shape or another are the penalty of thought as conducted by the lesser deities known as men and women, or even as teachers. The price of effort, however well intended, or carefully directed, is a measure of error. Willingness to face the error is a pledge of our integrity; and power to learn from mistakes is at once a form of our self-respect and our social piety.

The ignoring of these somewhat axiomatic considerations is the most widely influential fallacy in education. Too much time and energy are wasted in the effort to eliminate entirely the element of risk and danger from the experiment. Conversely, not enough confidence is felt in the good results of intelligently conducted experiment. Definiteness, precision, and accuracy are taken out of their proper province—that of ever-present factors in the process of education—and made indispensable parts of the material results. Hence arises the confusion of thought in students, teachers, and public concerning the nature of education. The mind that permits itself to be betrayed into an accept-

¹ Read at the meeting of the New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools.

ance of the popular disjunction between, say, information and discipline, or practical efficiency and culture, or a large income and a quiet conscience, or the ability to add to human knowledge and skill in holding one's tongue, is lost. False alternatives of this sort are the pest of education. The aim of education is not met by an "either-or," even when it is so generously interpreted as to embrace the whole world between its terms. Nothing short of "whatever is" should ideally satisfy the honest ambition of a teacher of ABC's. The right method of mastering the alphabet contains all the law and the gospel of education; and the absolutely right method is still to seek, as are also the perfect teacher and the model pupil. These facts are too often forgotten. The college finds fault with the secondary schools; the schools blame the kindergarten and the nursery; and all join to charge the home and parents with errors of omission and commission unto the third and fourth generation.

If these objections were all well taken, the reason for the existence of schools and education would disappear. Once taught, always taught, would be the history of the intellectually satisfied little molecule of mind. Infancy would become of age by repeating itself. Growth would be exchanged for iteration, and the joy of acquisition would be all in retrospect.

Certainly this recital is doleful enough to be an idiot's tale and history, but the fallacy of regretting the conditions that make it impossible is not always obvious. The one method applicable to all minds, the absolutely best scheme of studies, the infallible recipe for producing success in life—these are the forms in which fallacy unstrings the points of our endeavors as teachers. Strange companionships come about in the effort of men to present a sturdy opposition to influences that seem threatening aspects of education, because the influences are in themselves harmful and obtrusive. The habit of looking to education as their cause is a form of fallacy shared by the most enlightened and prudent of all time. It is not unlike the notion that because all church members ought to be saints, any shortcoming in the deacon is the fault of the church. Jonathan Edwards, in his letter to Sir William Pepperell on the education

of girls among the Stockbridge Indians, charges the same faults upon the characteristic English education of his day that Professor William James lays bare in his address of last summer to the Harvard alumni. And still more interesting is it to reflect that St. Augustine had been before them both in the acuteness and competence of his arraignment of the system whose worst results he had evaded, as he believed, only by the grace of God. The virtuous force of bad example in a world traditionally declared by its Maker to be all very good, in spite of the flaws and flecks in it, is not utilized by breaking the connection between the evil in the world and the world's Maker, nor by attempting to force into exile and solitary confinement forces that, however bad they may be, are always good for something.

Snap judgments, conventional estimates, surface views, are nowhere more dangerous than in the field of adverse criticism, where the critic is tempted to think himself candid, when he is really only taking things easy. The discerning distillation of the soul of good out of the demand for short-cuts in education, of the influence of commercialism, of worship of system, of dependence upon elaborate machinery, of trust in vain repetition, is the real purpose for the enumeration of them as evil. To turn time backward, and try to restore the alienated majesty of music and gymnastic, of gold and silver embroidery, of handicrafts, or of the chores of our New England ancestors, is only to vary one set of mistakes by another. Good Sir Andrew Aguecheek wails out the desolation of many who think themselves vastly his superiors when he cries: "What is 'pourquoi'? do or not do? I would I had bestowed that time in the tongues, that I have in fencing, dancing, and bear-baiting. O, had I but followed the arts!" Good men have doubtless saved their souls and bad men lost them as much in spite of chores as by reason of them. And so of all the rest. There is more in any man than the best system of education will account for; there is much in the best of us that we should not dare to hold any training or teacher responsible for. But we are tempted to supply the demand for definiteness in our theory and practice of teaching. We respond to the call for well-rounded courses of education by contrivances

that often end by persuading us that their good results might not have followed from any one of a score of other combinations—or from no combination at all, provided the appropriate motive or stimulus operated.

Almost the exact converse of this lack of faith and courage is the trust in what is striking and obtrusive. Is it not possible that appliances may be so multiplied as to defeat their own end in education as in manufactures? The mind may be distracted and worried by its labor-saving devices. The student may be bewildered by his advantages and mastered by his instruments. As long as these truths are so obviously true, and so readily recognized, and so familiarly presented to our experience, it seems remarkable that so fallacious a value should attach to the size and shape and money value of the body in which they appear to us. The amount of endowment, the value of "the plant," the extent and cost of apparatus, the number of books in the library, the expense of administration, the number and cost of scholarships, are far more influential on the public mind when they appear as figures in thousands and tens of thousands than as forces in human units. The money spent on school buildings is often the best evidence of a town's interest in education. The ability to spend money in such ways often exhausts the ambition of a community in things intellectual.

Still more dangerous is the form of this fallacy affecting the aims of education and the teachers themselves. Its most specious form is that of the demand for a "suitable support," for a way of living congenial to one's tastes, for a recognition in salary and social privilege of the scholar's services to the community. The scholar who is worthy the name needs no pay for his sacrifices; for he makes none. An artist in soul and mind has the same satisfaction in his labor that a painter, sculptor, poet, or other maker has. His rewards are not the less real for being inconvertible, incommunicable, and non-transferable. But it requires increasing clearness of vision and steadfastness of purpose on his part to escape the infection of fashion, display, and luxury maintained, not only as an end in itself, but as a sign of an approving Providence. As we approach late middle age, it

becomes more and more difficult to avoid wondering whether we have sinned, or our fathers, that we have a slender bank account, and even slenderer store of strength and eyesight. To have taught helpfully is not enough. The teacher may not be satisfied to rank his influence with good air, fresh water, and the blessed spirit of which thou canst not tell whither it cometh. On the contrary, he must leave his stamp on his generation. He must have a personal hall-mark for his workmanship, his pattern, his cut. Or he must "do something," as the phrase goes. "Doing something" again takes on aggressive forms. It is expressed in foreign degrees, editorial work, criticism, and all the items that show so well in the concluding summary of biographical estimates. The longer the list of publications a teacher can show, the greater the satisfaction he may legitimately allow himself. On the other hand, if he does not publish, does not investigate, has not the spirit of research into the neglected corners of learning, or has not the temper of discovery or adventure in the seas and deserts of knowledge, then too often he is tempted to accuse himself of intellectual barrenness and falls into despair; or, still worse, he is tempted to take refuge in the emphasis of the disciplinary value of routine, in the elaboration of method for its own sake. For these things are as exact, precise, definite, and impressive as discovery or originality. A most successful teacher of many years' experience in India attributes her first stimulus to learn the language well, to a prayer of a native Bible woman: "My dear father, I ask only one thing of thee—that thou wilt look at this young green thing here and her husband no better. They know nothing at all. Only help them to get their tongues twisted." The young green thing referred to justified the terms of her description by not knowing in the least what the prayer meant, and by the time she had really found out, it was in a fair way to be realized.

The fallacy of method has perhaps its worst forms in the often-unsuspected worship on the teacher's part of his way simply because it is his. This can hardly fail to injure the student. Exposure to this type of educational germ would doubtless oftener be fatal if the student were less frequently

protected by the inoculation of his own wilfulness. The corresponding fallacy on his side is a dependence upon what he calls interest in his work. It is usually only another name for doing what he pleases, when he pleases—and only then and that. The fallacy of confusion can go no farther than in the identification of this game of chance for the highest stake with work at once the most orderly and the most miraculous thing in the world. Interest as the reward of work is the truth triumphant. Interest as the motive to work is the white lie of the code of character. This insistence upon rigid form and personal interest takes unexpected shapes. What has endeared itself by real or fancied associations is stubbornly maintained as productive of good that it may never have done or that at all events many other devices might have secured. Schools, teachers, systems, like the noble Moor, are loved for the dangers they have passed, and oftentimes with as calamitous results.

Much of the present widespread discussion concerning the college as an independent stage of education is marked by the presence of this fallacy. In the fear that harm may come to the college idea, the wildest conclusions are tolerated and the emptiest premises accepted. Whatever the services of the college in the past, whatever the honor and dignity of its history and, however strong the desire of innocent hearts for its continuance, that continuance will depend ultimately upon the ability of the college to do a sort of work that is needed and that nothing else can do with as little waste of energy. If the school and the university can successfully do its work between them, the college will not be allowed to prolong its life by another illustration of pathetic fallacy in its death song. The college may as reasonably be tried on its merits as the district school or the endowed academy. Those of us who love it or live by it will have to learn, for the first time perhaps, or regretfully over again, that our loving and our living are in the strictest sense private concerns; their highest value as facts being their indifference. But in our fallibleness we do not see them so. Our personal attachment to our actions and our affections, even when, like Mrs. Malaprop, we began with a little aversion, becomes our strongest

argument for their maintenance and confuses all our judgments of them. Witness the case of the old school-principal who defended his preparation of a college freshman from the fault-finding of the college registrar on the ground that there could be no truth in the charges, as the freshman had been prepared by precisely the same methods that had been in use for forty years. If his endowment of loyalty had only included the adjustments of progress among its objects, the school world would have been the better, and the man himself none the worse certainly.

In this connection properly appears the alumni fallacy. It consists of a strong preference for the old college, the old days, the ways of our time, the men of our class, and the virtues and vices, the strength and the weakness, of our special mixture of human nature, together with a definitely expressed regret for changes that are not denied to be improvements. Some tastes are respectable only as a concession to individual limitation. As factors of the social well-being, they are unpardonable. A recent discussion in the London *Times* on the general subject of the constitution of matter illustrates the confusions growing out of this fallacious temper. A leader headed "Lord Kelvin, Science and Greek" deals with the confidence claimed for Lord Kelvin's opinions and his public expression of them because he is a "prince of science." The failure on the part of the public to understand the issue between him and his critics, and the failure of his critics to understand him or the public's point of view, are attributed to the public's lack of knowledge of Greek, and is accounted for by the desire to get along without Greek in the universities. The controversy grows more and more involved, and the confusion of thought more complete, as one after another the points are made, with a vigor that would have been surprising if that faculty had not been fully occupied by the writer's seriousness, that the critics and the interested public had all studied Greek and valued it second only to science or something else, although they felt that they might have given it the first place in their esteem if they had not been compelled to study it. Other contributions to the columns of the *Times* take into con-

sideration the real meaning attaching to Lord Kelvin's title as "prince of science." It appears that some scientists deny that their branches of human inquiry admit of such relation even by way of "a figger of speech." And so, after questioning whether science may best be studied by way of Greek, the plain reader is confronted with the doubt whether there is any such thing as science, or the scientific attitude, or scientific attainment. He might reflect that there are still facts, many facts and awkward ones, and that they affect learned scientists much as they do plain men and women of everyday passions.

Time and discussion move faster in some respects in this country than in England, but there is similar confusion and restlessness, with like inconclusiveness, on subjects allied to these. We are interested in the length of the college course, the proper place of technical study, and the claim of religion to serious attention as a discipline of the intellect. Nobody should regret the prominence given to these subjects, but everybody should regret the waste of strength, dissipated in bad logic and faint courage and misplaced emotion. Things are not so bad, after all, and yet they are not so good that they might not be better. The union of this optimism in the general trend of things with absolute candor about their details is the finest fruit of ripe reason.

But it is not left to teachers to try their experiments and pay their penalties in serene independence of all but the considerations affecting their class. The situation is complicated by the fallacies of feeling constantly affecting the pupils and public they have to work with. Some of these errors are too remote in their origin and too stubborn in character to admit of control by any forces except those of time and experience and contact with life. But there are others with which every teacher is painfully familiar. They result from the mistaking of the scheme of education itself. The student puts success in meeting classroom requirements in place of his own initiative, or he values his reputation among his mates higher than he does the power of doing work. In like manner, parents covet for their children the distinction that high rank in the class lists and prizes and membership in exclusive societies confer. These easily come to

be valued for themselves, instead of for the slight service they render as outward and visible signs of spiritual wealth. Truly, there can be few fallacies more deplorable than the false estimate of success that exhausts a young man or woman in the effort to gain prominence before he begins the real work of life. The notion that character is as completely revealed in the trifles as in the important affairs of existence is likely to be misapplied. Parents believe in a general endowment of intelligence which, under the name of capacity, they expect their children to acquire. They believe also that there is a general faculty of attention which can be turned on or off at will, and can be commanded to its full extent at any time by a properly trained mind—one that has had advantages. These are the parents who object to any interference with their children's health or the family plans by school programs, and who yet are surprised if the name of plants or constellations are unfamiliar, and dead languages are unintelligible, and modern languages are not spoken fluently. Often their ideals are vaguely expressed in phrases like, "Concentration is the whole secret;" or, "A love of knowledge is the one thing necessary." And many a man is heard to attribute his share of success in life to the influence of such a phrase. But his experience only illustrates the fact that men's behavior is often more rational than the account they can give of it.

So long a list of fallacies could never have been collected about a subject to which men are indifferent. So much confusion of thought could not exist concerning a matter that men were willing to ignore. So many forms of the same mistake could not recur about an interest that men could make up their minds to forget. The truth is that, next to religion, education occupies the best part of the attention of the best minds. And the existence of all this confusion bears testimony to the vital force asserting itself through manifold forms of energy. There is good in all; none of them is perfect; the mission of each is to challenge attention, to disappoint overconfidence, to reward patience.

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